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ABSTRACT

Research supports the anecdotal observation that unmarried mothers and their children face greater obstacles and suffer greater strains than married couples and their children. Less is known about the specific characteristics of the women who have births outside of marriage. This research brief paints a fuller picture of nonmarital childbearing. The data presented here dispel many inaccurate perceptions about unmarried mothers. Research findings indicate that: (1) the percentage of births to unmarried women increased substantially until 1994 and has since plateaued; (2) women in their early twenties have the highest rate of births outside of marriage; (3) teens account for a diminishing share of all births outside of marriage; (4) only about half of nonmarital births are first births; (5) the majority of births outside of marriage are unintended at conception; (6) racial and ethnic disparities in nonmarital childbearing are declining; (7) the proportion of nonmarital births to cohabiting parents is increasing; (8) whites show the greatest increase in births to cohabiting couples; and (9) the majority of unmarried mothers are romantically involved with the father of their baby at the time of the birth. The brief concludes with an examination of factors behind the trends in nonmarital childbearing, the implications of nonmarital childbearing for mothers and children, and public perception of the situation versus reality. Contains 20 references. (EV)

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Child Trends Research Brief

by

Elizabeth Terry-Humen, Jennifer Manlove, Kristin A. Moore

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Child TRENDS
RESEARCH BRIEF

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Births Outside of Marriage: Perceptions vs. Reality

By Elizabeth Terry-Humen, M.P.P., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D. and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D.

April 2001

Births to unmarried women have risen substantially in recent decades. In 1970, the overwhelming majority of children in this country - 89 percent - were born to married couples. By 1999, one in every three births occurred outside of marriage. This increase in childbearing outside of marriage - nonmarital childbearing - has been under way at least since the 1940s. After very large increases in the 1970s and 1980s, nonmarital childbearing rates peaked in the first half of the 1990s, and then declined slightly. However, rates of nonmarital childbearing remain high, as have concerns about what this means for children, families, and the larger society. Indeed, the high rate of nonmarital childbearing is one of the factors that led to welfare reform.

Research supports the anecdotal observation that unmarried mothers and their children face greater obstacles and suffer greater strains than married couples and their children. Much less is known about the specific characteristics of the women who have births outside of marriage. This research brief paints a fuller picture of nonmarital childbearing. The data presented here dispel many inaccurate perceptions about unmarried mothers. The classic image of an unmarried mother is that she is a teen, a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, a first-time mother of a child born outside of marriage, and that she is not in a relationship with the father of her child. The data show that the reality today is often quite different.

Trends in Nonmarital Childbearing

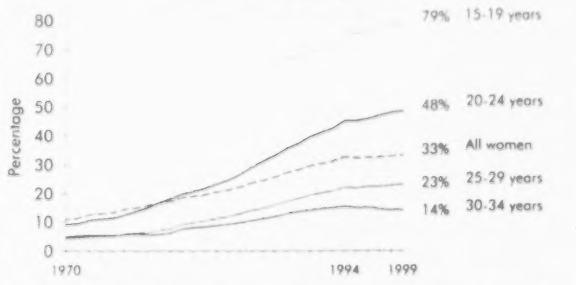
The *percentage* of births to unmarried women increased substantially until 1994 and has since plateaued. Data assembled and analyzed by the National Center for Health Statistics show that the percentage of births that occur outside of marriage has risen dramatically over the past several decades. Approximately one-tenth of all births (11 percent) were to unmarried women in 1970, compared with one-third (33 percent) of all births in 1994 (see Figure 1).[1] This percentage remained virtually unchanged from 1994 until 1999.

In 1999:

- The vast majority (79 percent) of births to teens aged 15-19 were nonmarital.

FIGURE 1

The percentage of births to unmarried women has increased for all age groups.



Source: Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000.

- Almost half (48 percent) of births to women aged 20-24 were nonmarital.
- Almost a quarter (23 percent) of births to women aged 25-29 were nonmarital.

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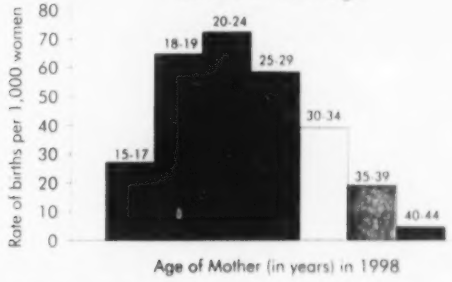
The *rate* of births to unmarried women increased until the mid-1990s and then declined slightly. The *nonmarital birth rate* measures the number of births for every 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44. This rate rose steadily across the second half of the twentieth century for U.S. women. For example, the nonmarital birth rate for all women aged 15-44 increased from 26.4 births per 1,000 unmarried women in 1970, until it reached a high of 46.9 births per 1,000 unmarried women in 1994. After peaking in 1994, the nonmarital birth rate declined to 43.9 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44 in 1999.[1]

Women in their early twenties have the highest rate of births outside of marriage. When most people think of nonmarital childbearing, the image that comes most readily to mind is of a teen mother. In the public perception, nonmarital childbearing *is* teen childbearing. However, although the majority of teens who give birth are indeed not married, women in their early twenties have the highest nonmarital birth *rates* (see Figure 2).[1] In 1998:

- Women aged 20-24 had 72.3 births per 1,000 unmarried women.
- Women aged 25-29 had 58.4 births per 1,000 unmarried women.

FIGURE 2

Women in their early twenties have the highest rates of births outside of marriage.



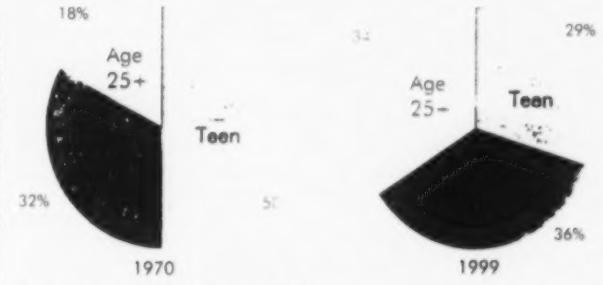
Source: Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 2000.

- In comparison, teens aged 15-17 had 27.0 births per 1,000 unmarried women and teens aged 18-19 had 64.5 per 1,000 unmarried women.
- Rates for women older than 29 were also lower: 39.1 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 30-34; 19.0 per 1,000 unmarried women aged 35-39; and 4.6 per 1,000 unmarried women aged 40-44.

Teens account for a diminishing share of all births outside of marriage. In 1970, 50 percent of all nonmarital births occurred to females under age twenty. By 1999, less than one-third of all nonmarital births (29 percent) were to teens. The proportion of all nonmarital births to women in their early twenties (aged 20-24 years) increased from 32 percent in 1970 to 36 percent in 1999. The largest percentage point increase during this time period was found among women aged 25 and older. In 1970, less than one-fifth (18 percent) of all nonmarital births were to women aged 25 and older. By 1999, women aged 25 and older accounted for more than one-third (34 percent) of all nonmarital births (see Figure 3).[1]

FIGURE 3

Teens account for a diminishing share of nonmarital births.*



* Due to rounding, percentages may not equal 100.%

Source: Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 2000.

Still, many nonmarital births were preceded by teen births. Although the percentage of all nonmarital births to teens has declined, teen mothers are likely to have subsequent births outside of marriage. Between 1992 and 1995, more than one-third (35 percent) of nonmarital births to women aged twenty and older were preceded by a teenage birth.[2] In addition, among all *first* nonmarital births, teens do account for a larger proportion of births - 49 percent.[3]

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Only about half of nonmarital births are first births. The public perception is that nonmarital births are first births. Recent *Vital Statistics* estimates show that only 50 percent of all nonmarital births in 1998 were mothers' first births.[3] A related study by Child Trends used the National Survey of Family Growth to examine nonmarital births between 1992 and 1995. It also found that about half of nonmarital births were first births. Of the remaining nonmarital births, slightly more than one-quarter were second-born children and slightly less than one-quarter were third or later births.[2] Thus, despite the widely held idea that births outside of marriage are generally first births, about half of nonmarital births are second or later births. In addition, 16 percent of all nonmarital births in 1994 occurred to "formerly married women" who are currently divorced or widowed.[4]

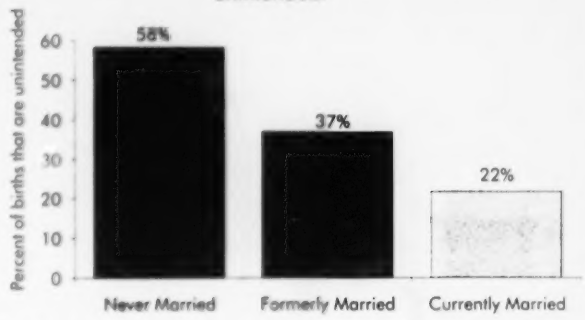
The majority of births outside of marriage are unintended at conception. The public perception is that many nonmarital births are planned by the mother. In reality, the vast majority of nonmarital pregnancies (78 percent of pregnancies to never married women and 63 percent of pregnancies to formerly married women) are unintended.[4] Data from the mid-1990s show that more than 60 percent of unintended pregnancies to unmarried women end in an abortion.[4] Even so, according to 1994 estimates, more than half (55 percent) of all nonmarital births were unintended at conception. The likelihood that a birth is unintended differs by prior marital status. For example, 58 percent of births to never-married women were unintended, compared with 37 percent of births to women who had been married at one time (see Figure 4).[4] In comparison, 22 percent of births that occur within marriage are unintended.

Racial and ethnic disparities in nonmarital childbearing are declining. The public perception is that childbearing outside of marriage is driven by births to racial and ethnic minorities. And, indeed, the nonmarital birth rate for black women has been higher than the nonmarital birth rate for white women since statistics began to be collected by race and ethnicity in 1940.[1] Over the past three decades, however, the United States has witnessed an increase in the nonmarital birth rate among white women and a decline among black women (see Figure 5):[1]

- In 1970, white women had a nonmarital birth rate of 13.9 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44. This rate had more than doubled by 1998, to 37.5 nonmarital births per 1,000.
- In 1970, black women had a nonmarital birth rate of 95.5 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44. This rate declined by almost one-quarter by 1998, to 73.3 per 1,000.

FIGURE 4

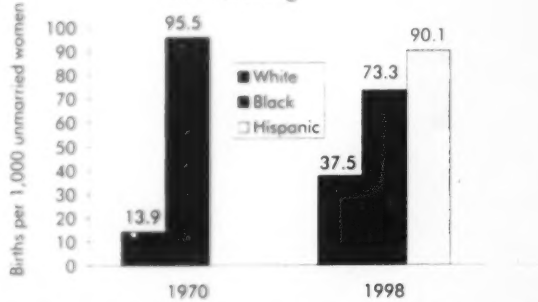
The majority of births outside of marriage are unintended.



Source: Henshaw, SK. Unintended Pregnancy in the United States. *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol 30, No 1, 1998

FIGURE 5

Racial and ethnic disparities in nonmarital birth rates are declining.



Source: Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000

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- Hispanic women now have the highest nonmarital birth rate of all racial and ethnic groups. Data have only been collected for this subgroup since 1990, when the nonmarital birth rate was 89.6 births per 1,000 unmarried Hispanic women aged 15-44. The rate steadily increased, reaching a peak in 1994 (101.2 per 1,000) before declining back to the 1990 level in 1998 (90.1 per 1,000).

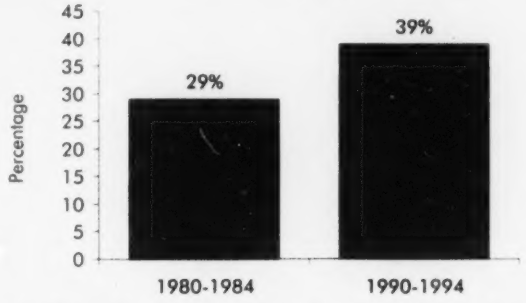
The Cohabitation Factor

Cohabitation refers to two unmarried people who are living together in a marriage-like relationship. The proportion of people who have ever cohabited or are currently living in a cohabiting union is increasing. In 1987, one-third (33 percent) of the adult population between the ages of 19 and 44 reported they had ever cohabited, compared with almost one-half of adults (45 percent) in 1995.[5] Sometimes these cohabiting couples have children.

The proportion of nonmarital births to cohabiting parents is increasing. The public perception is that unmarried women are not in contact with the father of their child. The reality is that childbearing outside of marriage is not confined to single-parent households. The percentage of nonmarital births that occurred to cohabiting couples has increased from 29 percent in the early 1980s to 39 percent in the early 1990s (see Figure 6).[5] Recent declines in the percentage of births to married couples are almost entirely due to an increase in births to cohabiting parents.[5] Yet, cohabiting relationships are fragile and relatively short in duration, with less than half lasting five years or more.[5] Cohabiting families are also more likely to be economically disadvantaged than married families.[6]

FIGURE 6

The percentage of all nonmarital births that are to cohabiting parents is increasing.

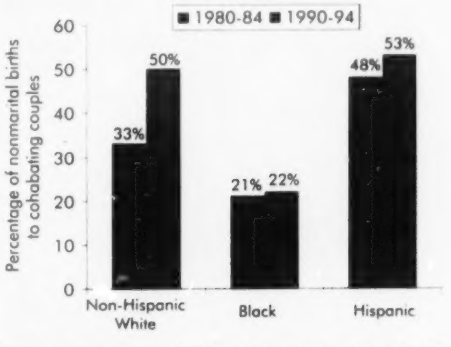


Source: Bumpass, L and Lu, H. Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family context in the United States, *Population Studies*, March 2000, pp29-41

Whites show the greatest increase in births to cohabiting couples. Data from the National Survey of Families and Households and the National Survey of Family Growth show large differences by race and ethnicity in the percentage of nonmarital births to cohabiting couples (see Figure 7).[5] In the 1990s, Hispanics and whites had higher proportions of nonmarital births to cohabiting parents (53 percent and 50 percent respectively) than African Americans (22 percent). In addition, whites have had the greatest increase in births within cohabitation, increasing from 33 percent in the early 1980s to 50 percent in the early 1990s.

FIGURE 7

Whites show the greatest increase in births to cohabiting couples.



Source: Bumpass, L and Lu, H. Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family context in the United States, *Population Studies*, March 2000, pp29-41

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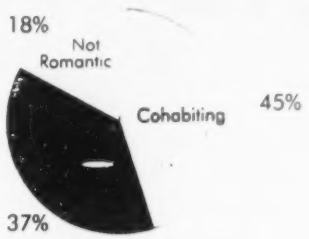
The majority of unmarried mothers are romantically involved with the father of their baby at the time of the birth. Although nonmarital relationships are less stable than marital unions, the majority of unmarried mothers report that they are cohabiting with or "romantically involved" with the father of their child at the time of the birth (see Figure 8).[7] A recent study of nonmarital births in seven metropolitan areas *(Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study)* found that 45 percent of unmarried mothers reported they were cohabiting with the father of the child at the time of the birth. An additional 37 percent reported they were romantically involved with the child's father but were living apart from him.[7] (The remaining 18 percent of unmarried mothers reported they were neither living with the child's father nor in a romantic relationship with him.)

FIGURE 8

Most urban unmarried mothers cohabit or are "romantically involved" with the father of their child at the time of birth.



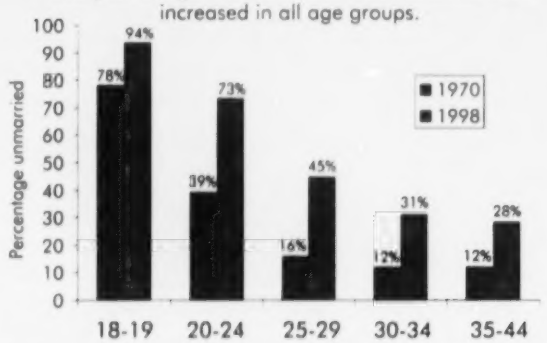
Source: Fragile Families Research Brief, Dispelling Myths About Unmarried Fathers, Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University & Social Indicators Survey Center, Columbia University, May 2000.

Behind the Trends in Nonmarital Childbearing

The percentage of women who are unmarried is increasing in all age categories. The increase in childbearing outside of marriage reflects a reduction in the likelihood of marriage at all ages. For example, the percentage of women aged 15-44 who were unmarried increased from 36 percent in 1970 to 49 percent in 1998.[1] Increases in the percentage of unmarried women can be seen in every age group (see Figure 9),[1] with especially notable increases among women aged twenty and older. For example, in 1970, less than one-fifth (16 percent) of all women aged 25-29 were unmarried. By 1998, almost one-half (45 percent) were unmarried. The decline in marriage is due to a later age at first marriage, increases in cohabitation and divorce, and a growing number of people who never marry.[8,9] In addition, the percentage of unmarried pregnant women who marry before they give birth has declined.[1] Thus, the increase in nonmarital childbearing reflects not so much changes in childbearing patterns as in marriage and cohabitation patterns.

FIGURE 9

The percentage of women who are unmarried has increased in all age groups.



Source: Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics, 2000.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the trends in nonmarital births. During the time period when the nonmarital birth rate first soared and then more recently declined slightly, many changes were occurring both politically and socially in the United States. Factors that may have contributed to the increase in the nonmarital birth rate in past decades include changes in social norms; stagnant wages for low-skilled workers; and, in some places, urban social disintegration related to drugs, unemployment, and poverty.

Factors that may be associated with the recent small decline in nonmarital birth rates include:

- A vigorous economic expansion;
- Changes in the age composition of the population;
- Use of new methods of contraception, especially Depo-Provera and Norplant;

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- A focus on males as targets for reproductive health policies and an increased emphasis on child support enforcement;
- Welfare reform efforts targeting nonmarital births and the strengthening of marriage;
- Increased public education about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases; and
- A rise in conservative attitudes toward premarital sex.[10]

An Important Implication of Nonmarital Childbearing

Unmarried mothers and their children are more likely to be disadvantaged. The image projected by movie stars or well-educated, well-paid professional women who choose unwed motherhood has little in common with the situation of most unmarried mothers. Women who have nonmarital births are, on average, more disadvantaged than women who have births within marriage, both before and after a nonmarital birth. Data show that women who have nonmarital births have lower educational attainments and lower incomes, are less likely to work full-time, and are more likely to receive welfare.[11] Women who have a nonmarital birth are also less likely to marry by age 35.[12] Being older doesn't seem to make the circumstances of unmarried motherhood much easier. Unmarried women who are aged 20 and older at the time they give birth are likely to be as poor as their teenage counterparts.[13]

Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to be economically disadvantaged.[14] These children are more likely to grow up in a single parent family and to experience multiple living arrangements during childhood.[5,15] Multiple changes in living arrangements among children born to unmarried parents are associated with reduced educational attainment, an increased risk of having premarital sex during adolescence and of having a premarital birth, and a premature assumption of adult roles.[15,16,17]

Perception vs. Reality

The data presented in this research brief challenge some common notions about women who have births outside of marriage, as illustrated by these five contrasts:

- The *public perception* is that nonmarital births are equivalent to teen births. The *reality* is that women aged twenty or older account for more than seven in ten nonmarital births, and that women in their twenties have the highest rates of nonmarital childbearing. The increase in nonmarital childbearing in the past three decades has been driven by births to women aged twenty and older.
- The *public perception* is that nonmarital births are first births. The *reality* is that half of nonmarital births occur to women who have already had one or more children.
- The *public perception* is that nonmarital childbearing is the same as premarital childbearing, that is, childbearing by a woman who has never been married. The *reality* is that almost one in six nonmarital births occur to women who have, in fact, been married but are now divorced or widowed.
- The *public perception* is that nonmarital births are not much of an issue for whites. The *reality* is that, although black and Hispanic women have higher nonmarital birth rates than white women, white women have experienced the greatest increases in nonmarital childbearing in the past three decades, while nonmarital birth rates have declined among black women and stabilized among Hispanic women.
- The *public perception* is that unmarried mothers are not in contact with or have been abandoned by the child's father. The *reality* is that the relationship context of nonmarital childbearing has been changing. Currently, almost 40 percent of unmarried mothers are cohabiting with the father of their baby, at least at the time of the birth. In addition, even when couples are not married or living together, a large percentage of unmarried mothers report that they are romantically involved with

the father of the baby and hope to marry. Nevertheless, history suggests that these unions have a disproportionate risk of dissolution.

Conclusion

Although nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically across several decades, there has been a recent modest downturn in nonmarital birth rates, and the percentage of women who have a birth outside of marriage has stabilized. At this point, it is difficult to determine whether this is a temporary small decline or the start of a sustained reduction in childbearing outside of marriage. We do know that historical changes in marriage patterns - not fertility rates per se - have driven the increases in childbearing outside of marriage.

Policy makers and the public have various motivations for wanting the decline in nonmarital childbearing to continue. The federal welfare reform law, passed in 1996, set out to encourage the formation and strengthening of two-parent families in an effort to reduce dependence on public assistance and provide better environments for children. Some members of the public want to increase marriage rates and strengthen the institution of the two-parent family because of their belief in the sanctity of marriage. Still others want to reduce high abortion rates associated with nonmarital pregnancy.

Child Trends focuses on the children born to unmarried parents because they are at a distinct disadvantage as they move through life. Statistically, mothers who bear and raise children without the support of a husband are more likely to be poor and to report greater stress than their married counterparts, and their children are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems. Research findings show that wanted children raised by both of their biological parents in a low-conflict marriage have an easier lot in life and the best chance for healthy development.[6,18,19,20] We recognize that many children will not be raised in families that meet all of these criteria, and that many children raised in other circumstances develop well. Thus, future research should explore the factors that promote well-being among children born to unmarried parents.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children and families. For additional information, please visit our web site at www.childtrends. org.

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